



Sławomir Łotysz, *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku*, Universitas, 2022, 565 pp.

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Abstract

The article is a review of *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [The Pinsk Marshes: Nature, Knowledge, and Politics in Polish Polesia before 1945] by Sławomir Łotysz, Universitas 2022, 565 pp. ISBN 978-83-242-3958-0.

Keywords: Polesia; Sławomir Łotysz; *Pińskie błota*; environmental history

Over the last two decades, Polish research into the history of the western part of Polesia, which was within the borders of the Second Polish Republic between 1921 and 1939, has resulted in the publication of both monographs and volumes of sources (Cichoracki, 2007, 2014, 2016; Obrębski, 2007; Śleszyński, 2014; Śleszyński & Jodzio, 2009; Śleszyński & Szarejko, 2014; Smolarczyk, 2014 Tomaszewski, 1963). In 2022, another book

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on this subject was published: a study by Sławomir Łotysz on the interaction between man and the natural environment in the province of Polesia in the interwar period. The author devotes particular attention to infrastructural projects related, above all, to the conceptions of land reclamation in the region, as well as to the broadly understood sphere of agricultural economy. While previous directions of research on the history of Polesia focused on political and social history, Łotysz situates his study in the current of environmental history. Thus, a new work appeared which was to be an expression of a new view of the region's past.

The structure of the book is based on the selection of problems discussed. The main body consists of ten chapters, respectively focusing on the following topics: an extensive introduction to the subject (1: "Trouble or Opportunity?"); the relationship of local inhabitants with wetlands and the impact of natural environment on their everyday life (2: "Man and Wetlands"); the economic circumstances of the population (3: "Amphibious Economy"); conceptions and projects of land reclamation, especially those pursued by the state (4: "The Institutionalization of Wetlands"); interest in the region on the part of the scientific community (5: "An Unknown Land"); technical factors of land reclamation projects (6: "The Engineering of the Impact"); nature conservation (7: "An Inevitable Catastrophe?"); the role of the military (8: "A Natural Fortress"); Jewish settlement projects (9: "Polesia not for Jews"); World War II (10: "At the Mercy of the Powers"). Although the author announces a focus on the interwar period, the time span covered is longer: it goes back to the second half of the eighteenth century.

The choice of the thematic axis of his work enabled the author to reach for sources which previously did not function in the literature on the subject. Undoubtedly, with his book, he contributes new information to the literature precisely because he based his findings partly on material rarely exploited before. Successful sections of the book include those which are closely linked to the main topic. It is particularly worth noting the findings on the functioning of state institutions involved in infrastructure projects. The author offers an interesting reconstruction of the conditions in which they functioned, including, for instance, the problems of financing the projects, the availability of highly qualified engineering professionals and technical manpower, and systemic obstacles (very strong influence of the military on the shaping of the natural environment). Łotysz shows the complex system of interrelationships between these factors by reconstructing the genesis, history, and legacy of the Office for the Polesia Drainage Project (Biuro Projektu Melioracji Polesia, BPMP). The author also makes interesting observations on the functioning of agriculture in the wetlands and the impact of climate phenomena on the everyday life of local villagers. He touches upon a wide range of issues: we have comments on health issues, traditional customs, and material culture. His work also makes a contribution to the biographies of people who played a notable social and political role in the interwar province of Polesia. Importantly, we also learn about another side of their activity, related to their professional careers.

It can be concluded that in such spheres as the history of material culture of rural areas, the history of institutions related to the agricultural sector, and the mechanisms of public investment policy, we are dealing with a cognitively interesting approach. These issues very clearly fall within the framework of “environmental history”. Thus, those parts of the book which are closely related to the main thread of Łotysz’s considerations should be considered a valuable addition to the existing knowledge on the functioning of Polesia within the Second Republic. However, his book also has some weaknesses. The polemical part of the present discussion concerns above all some of the author’s remarks and interpretations related to the broadly understood political history of the interwar Polish state. The most questionable are the interpretations of nationality issues, and comments on social conflicts.

The key issue here seems to be the author’s attempt to convince the reader that in the case of the authorities of the Second Republic, we are dealing with “an essentially colonial policy of the state towards the ‘Borderlands’ – the Polish Orient” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 59). This assumption, therefore, applies to the entire interwar period and refers to the situation in almost half of the territory of the then Polish state. This “colonial policy” was to be expressed not only in the actions of the authorities, but also in the “colonial narrative”. Łotysz argues that “the only means of colonization of Polesia” by Polish authorities was its Polonization, i.e. the Polonization of the Orthodox inhabitants of the region (Łotysz, 2022, p. 222). The author looks for the sources of legitimizing “Polish colonial policy in Polesia” in “racist theories [which] stemmed from the dogma of the civilizational superiority of the white man, deeply rooted in Western European societies” (Łotysz, 2022, p. 92).

The interpretation according to which the relations between the Polish state and its constituent eastern provinces were “colonial” in nature seems unjustified, and so do the conclusions formulated on this basis. This is because they are based on a faulty view of the causes, circumstances and goals of Polish policy in Polesia. Namely, the author does not consider one problem: the very fact that Polish policy was one of Polonization, which is beyond doubt, contradicts the claim that it was “racial” in nature and essentially “colonial”. The actions of Polish authorities can be seen as a project depriving members of the local population of national identity, or – given the state of “national consciousness” in the Polesia countryside – a project unilaterally creating one nation. It can be assessed as aggressive in its intent and often repressive in its form. However, precisely because it was a project of Polonization, it was in its essence emancipatory and inclusive. The “Poleshuk”, by becoming Polish, was to be granted access to all the privileges enjoyed by members of the ruling nation. This means that connecting such a project with “racism” is unjustified.

The claim that Polish policy in Polesia was colonial in nature contradicts the legal state of affairs at the time. Namely, citizens of the Second Republic were formally equal before the law. Of course, the restrictions on language rights or political freedoms that took place in relation to non-Polish, especially Slavic communities are beyond discussion. However, they did not stem from a colonial approach to the Belarusian and Ukrainian inhabitants of the eastern territories, which would assume indefinite oppression of national minorities

based on a sense of cultural superiority. The interferences indicated above had a different, strictly political source, and they were a constant feature. They were a consequence of defining the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state as a priority, which meant that centrifugal tendencies represented by national minorities were defined as a threat. The claim of the "Polish colonial policy" is doubtful also because it is quite difficult to accuse the Polish political elite of leaving – intentionally, and in a long-term perspective, permanently – a certain part of Poland's territory in a state of civilizational backwardness for economic or ethnic reasons. Indeed, the strategic aim of the authorities of the Second Republic was to overcome the division of the country into two parts which were different in terms of civilizational advancement, sloganized at the time as a more developed "Poland A" and a backward, eastern "Poland B". The overcoming of this split meant pushing for civilizational advancement of the underprivileged regions.

The pejorative tone of the comments on the policy of the authorities of the Second Republic reflects how the author views the Polish presence in Polesia in general. In the pages of the book, the reader can repeatedly find statements that Poles were an alien element, antagonistic to the "indigenous population of Polesia" (Łotysz, 2022, p. 43). What seems to be symptomatic of the author's approach is that in this context he gives examples of noble families of Ruthenian origin who were Polonized in the modern era. On this basis, it can be concluded that for Łotysz the key factor when it comes to being included in the "indigenous" group is one's distance from Polish culture. This means that assimilation to Polish culture eliminates one from the "indigenous" group, and that one's historical links with the region are irrelevant. Such a view seems controversial, to say the least. Polish authorities were resented by a significant part of the non-Polish population of the eastern provinces. This does not mean, however, that Poles were in principle an alien element there.

A major accusation against the interwar Polish administration is the lack of participation of Polesia villagers in the process of forming the principles of the project of draining the region's marshes. Łotysz (2022) notes that "nobody asked them" (p. 99), and they were skeptical about the idea of drainage. There is an impression that the author's intention is to convince the reader that the optimal solution was to leave the existing state of affairs as it was, since "the Poleshuk might simply not have wanted to drain the marshes" (Łotysz, 2022, p. 101). However, it does not seem that leaving such a peculiar "reserve" would be realistic in a modernizing state. Nor were the inhabitants of the region immune to the prospect of civilizational change. This was due to compulsory education and the experience of mobility resulting from mandatory military service. What also needs to be taken into account is the fact that Polesia villagers succumbed to the charm of the propaganda vision of Soviet industrialization achievements, reaching them through communist propaganda and Soviet radio. The author shows understanding for those actions of local residents that involved devastating infrastructural undertakings. Łotysz (2022) concludes that "what [...] was regarded as an act of vandalism was in fact an example of using for one's own needs

a culturally, environmentally, and politically alien infrastructure” (p. 119). It is impossible to follow the author’s suggestion that the administration of a sizable European state could condone similar practices in that day and age.

There are also factual errors in the book; several dozen such cases can be noted. Most of them appear in the context of the political geography of the Second Polish Republic, Polish-Soviet relations, and Polish military history. In themselves, these errors are mostly minor, especially considering that they are not directly related to the main subject of the book. However, the scale of their occurrence leads one to suspect that the author placed too much trust in his general orientation regarding the interwar period. This impression is confirmed by those few instances when the author’s mistakes are of a more serious caliber: the description of the most important pro-government press organ (*Gazeta Polska* [The Polish Gazette]) after May 1926 as a magazine associated with the National Democracy (Łotysz, 2022, p. 55), or the statement that Edward Rydz-Śmigły was “a politician who was very critical of the *Sanacja* regime” (p. 361). The problem is well illustrated by a seemingly minor slip in the name of an office: the name was not the “Main” Inspector (Łotysz, 2022, pp. 313, 315, 326), but Inspector General of the Armed Forces. It turns out, however, to be symptomatic of gaps in the author’s knowledge about, for instance, the realities of the political-military system of the Second Republic. Łotysz writes about the “rivalry” between the Inspector General of the Armed Forces and the General Staff (renamed as the Main Staff in 1928) (Łotysz, 2022, p. 315). In fact, the difference in weight between them was fundamental, and the General Staff was in practice an instrument of the Inspector General of the Armed Forces. The most visible sign of this was that the office of Inspector General was held by the key figures of the post-May camp: Marshal Józef Piłsudski, and then Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły.

Sławomir Łotysz explores new sources and his book introduces new issues. It sheds interesting light on many spheres of the functioning of rural communities in Polesia and public institutions of the Second Republic. At the same time, however, it is not without shortcomings. What raises doubts is the argumentation used in the study, especially in the case of statements concerning the nationality policy of Polish state authorities. The reader also encounters factual errors, whose frequency and sometimes form seem to suggest that the author has not sufficiently familiarized himself with the history of the interwar period as a separate period in Polish history.

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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest recenzją książki *Pińskie błota. Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku*, autorstwa Sławomira Łotysza, wydanej w wydawnictwie Universitas, 2022, 565 ss. ISBN 978-83-242-3958-0.

Słowa kluczowe: Polesie; Sławomir Łotysz; *Pińskie błota*; historia środowiskowa

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